Realtime publishers

Creating a Small Business Website Your Customers Will Trust

The Essentials Series

Good Websites to Great: Adding Reputation, Visibility, and Professionalism

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Introduction to Realtime Publishers

by Don Jones, Series Editor

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Don Jones

Introduction to Realtime Publishers i

Good Websites to Great: Adding Reputation, Visibility, and Professionalism 1

Developing a Reputation 1

Increasing Your Visibility 2

Exuding Professionalism 2

Earn Trust and Purchase Trust 3

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Good Websites to Great: Adding Reputation, Visibility, and Professionalism

Trust is only *the result* of creating a comfortable and dependable storefront. Yet in both the real world and the online world, it is possible to *buy* trust while you *earn* trust.

That trust comes in the form of reputation, gained through a trusted third party such as a licensing bureau, consumer advocacy group, or trust broker. Visibility begets trust, as customers find themselves repeatedly seeing your business appear when they seek a particular product. Finally, professionalism absolutely leads to trust. The more effort you put into looking good, the more your customers believe that you intend to be around for the long haul.

These three elements are no different between the online world and the traditional brick-and-mortar storefront. This final article discusses how these three elements in a business' online presence must meet (or in some cases exceed) the effort you put into your brick-and-mortar storefront.

Developing a Reputation

I recently completed a fairly large backyard construction project. For that project, we added a new brick patio, a very nice pergola, and an outdoor kitchen with a brand new barbeque grill. Although you've already heard the story of my barbeque grill purchase in this series' first article, the other elements—the ones involving construction—are also important to this story.

If you've ever outsourced construction work, you know that the field is full of potential contractors. You also know that there's no objective way to divine the contractor who creates a nightmare from the one who does good work. The only tried-and-true mechanism for finding the best ones is by asking around.

Online commerce has the same problem. The online world is accessible from anywhere, which means a store in Calcutta is just as easily accessed in Helsinki as it is in Denver. In terms of connectivity, the Internet is the great equalizer, putting Bob's Biscuit Factory on an even plane with Amazon.

The connectivity to Bob's Biscuit Factory involves the same steps as Amazon; why does Amazon get so many more customers than Bob does? One answer relates to the innate level of trust that people have in Amazon. Amazon has developed that level of trust through a long and arduous process. They have created transparent business processes that service customers well, right wrongs when they occur, and ensure that everyone is reasonably happy throughout the experience. Amazon also asserts that they are Amazon.

Bob, however, has a much smaller presence. Lacking Amazon's history, it is difficult for Bob to prove that he is indeed Bob and that he should be trusted. It is exactly here where the previous article's discussion on trust brokers comes in handy.

In creating a Website, Bob can work with a trust broker to purchase a unit of trust. In purchasing that trust, Bob will provide proof that he is who he says he is and that his business is valid. Because the trust broker is universally trusted, the broker's assertion that they trust Bob is usually good enough to start a relationship with potential customers.

Think of this like a math equation: A trusts B, and B trusts C; therefore, A trusts C. This equation works just the same with my backyard contractor. A friend of mine trusts the contractor, so I feel like I can too. I don't need extra verification of their experience and skill, because I trust my friend's judgment.

This process represents how trust seals work online. With them, your small- or micro-business can buy the trust it needs as it earns trust.

Increasing Your Visibility

Trust starts with the assertion that you are indeed who you say you are. But, trust continues by continually being visible when your customers need to find you. One way in which that process can occur is by using a graphical trust seal. Such graphics are usually provided by your trust provider, and are recognizable by potential customers. Those customers know that when they see a trust seal, they can trust your business. Trust seals can also be found on the Websites of others who reference you, or even search engines. Similar to my contractor experience, these trust seals continuously assert that you are trusted by a friend your customers themselves trust.

Exuding Professionalism

Finally, even for the smallest of purchases, customers want the assurance that they can return again and again to your store—*even if they don't intend to purchase future products from you*. It is the simple promise of your future presence that presents an added comfort level to your customers.

There are a number of ways to accomplish this future-proofing, all of which involve effort that can be recognized by a customer or potential customer. In the brick-and-mortar world, think about the fly-by-night store in the bad part of town. Or the shady store with no permanent fixtures, poor lighting, no signage, and little to no furniture or shelving. These kinds of stores feel less comfortable than others that are full of bright and cheery signage, copious shelving, and a sense that the store is here to stay.

In the online world, this recognition is the difference between a quickly-constructed Website and the smartly-designed one. Customers will notice when effort has been made. Effort establishes investment, and investment establishes the intent of permanence.

All of these are elements of professionalism that add to the overall comfort level with your online storefront. In combination with the right elements of trust—via third parties, through established business practices, the use of recognized payment mechanisms, an assertion of cleanliness, and the intent to remain malware free—elevate your Website above those that haven't spent the effort.

Earn Trust and Purchase Trust

This series has attempted to illustrate how the online world is no different from the real world in terms of how people shop. People today go through the same seven steps as they consider making a purchase, no matter whether the storefront exists down the street or down the network cable. Necessary for all business owners who desire an online presence then is the establishment of trust if they intend for customers to eventually transact.

Your Website presence must earn that trust from your potential customers; at the same time, it must purchase that trust through reputable—and universally trusted—online trust brokers. Through their assertion that you are who you say you are, as well as their repeated and visible notification, your small or micro-business can and will create a Website that your users will trust.